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Arcane Stories

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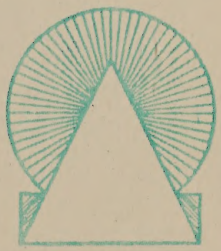

Arcane Stories — Fourth Series
by Francis Merchant

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Arcane Stories

1. A LINE FROM POINT TO POINT

A student of metaphysics came to a teacher for counsel.

"Draw a line from one point to another," was all that the teacher would say.

The student went away somewhat bewildered, for the statement seemed to lack relevance. After pondering on the matter, however, he began to suspect that there might be a deeper meaning in the counsel he had been given.

Returning to the teacher, the student addressed him, saying, "A line drawn from one point to another must be made of something. On paper, it is created by ink, crayon, or graphite from a pencil. Of what material is the line you asked me to draw composed?"

"Of thought," was the teacher's response.

"But the two points," said the student after a moment, "where are they located?"

"If thought is the composition of the line," reasoned the teacher, "one point must be within you."

"And the other?" queried the student.

"That lies in the Not-Self, does it not?" observed the teacher.

"You seem to be saying," said the student ponderingly, "that we should be related to the world outside us by a line of lighted thought."

"You yourself constitute one point," said the teacher. "Every problem that confronts you is a second."

"And lighted thought should be the creative relation between the two," added the student.

"All problems may be regarded as knotted energies that have coagulated at a certain point. The power to dissipate them lies in the creative, transforming mind."

"Thought, it would seem," said the student, "relates us to everything in the universe."

"And yet it is invisible, said the teacher. "Not a few persons act as if unaware that it is a precious possession."

"If thought relates me to everything in the universe," the student pondered, "am I also related to the stars and constellations of outer space?"

"Potentially, yes," replied the teacher.

"I see," said the student. "The quality of my thought determines the nature of the relationship. By drawing a thought-line from myself to the distant star, a channel is created along which creative essences can flow."

"Your theory is sound," observed the teacher, "but what about your practice?"

2. A BETTER SOLDIER

A retired military commander took up the study of mysticism, but was soon discouraged. He took his perplexities to a metaphysician.

"In the military arena," said the commander, "problems are clearly defined. The enemy stands before us, disputing our passage. He must be opposed and overcome by crushing force of superior strategy. In mysticism, evil is the enemy, but it assumes protean forms, and the means of doing battle with it are decidedly unclear."

"You find the military scheme of things specific, then," answered the metaphysician, "and the life of the spirit somewhat vague and nebulous by comparison?"

"Exactly," the commander concurred. "As a general, I know where the enemy is and the means I must employ to dislodge him, but how can I fight evil and put it to rout?"

"Actual warfare," declared the metaphysician, "is a manifestation on the physical plane of irreconcilable forces on more subtle levels."

"Such a definition does not help me," the commander remonstrated. "How can I do battle with an undefined enemy?"

"Your dilemma is understandable," the metaphysician sympathized. "In war, the foe is clearly objectified, but in the struggle of self-perfection, the enemy may be an aspect of one's self — or again, it may be a flawed idea, a false conception, or a negative value."

"It's all very confusing to me," sighed the commander. "I prefer an objectified enemy whom I can attack and overcome."

"Many people have a similar preference," observed the metaphysician, "but the spiritual life demands a subtler kind of soldiering."

"Subtler?" questioned the commander. "How so?"

"The enemy appears in a variety of disguises," explained the metaphysician, "and your first task is to identify him — and having done so, you must then devise an effective strategy to oppose the unmasked foe."

"Suppose a person cannot unveil the face of evil?"

"That is a common phenomenon," remarked the metaphysician. "Some people reach the end of their days unable to identify the enemy of all mankind."

"But in the army we are given weapons," observed the commander.

"In the mystical life, none are provided."

"Not so," countered the metaphysician. "Discrimination is a sword; truth is a powerful missile; patience, a shield."

"But whom does the soldier of the inner life serve?" the commander queried.

"Justice," replied the metaphysician, "the Justice that weighs the whole universe in its scales."

"I begin to realize," reflected the commander, "that I've spent most of my life on the wrong battlefield."

"What, then, do you propose to do?" inquired the metaphysician.

"Become a better soldier," the commander promptly answered.

3. THE TORTOISE SHELL

The old philosopher was walking on the beach with a young man at his side. The swirling surf advanced and receded rhythmically.

"In the face of the pounding sea and the expansive sky," the young man declared, "I feel rather small and helpless."

At this moment they came upon a turtle, inching its way in the sand.

"Study yonder turtle," counseled the old philosopher. "Mayhap he can provide you with insights."

The young man regarded the crawling creature dubiously.

"That tortoise seems smaller and more helpless than I."

"Legend tells us," said the old philosopher, "that Hermes once came upon a dead turtle. He made holes in the carapace and put strings through them, thus inventing the lyre. By so doing, he crafted an instrument that has delighted the world with the gift of music."

"It's a nice legend," replied the young man, "but I don't understand how it applies to me."

"If the turtle can yield uplifting music, why can't you?"

"But the turtle was dead when Hermes found it," the young man observed.

"When the personality egoism dies," rejoined the old philosopher, "the harmonies of the soul can sound forth."

The young man became thoughtfully silent.

4. STOMACH FUNCTIONS

A rich man, who found himself increasingly dissatisfied with life, came to a sage for advice.

After listening to the wealthy man express his frustrations, the other said, "Ponder on the function of the stomach in the human organism."

The rich man found the advice exceedingly strange, but he did as

he was bidden. However, the more he thought about the matter, the more puzzled he became.

Returning to the sage, he confessed his inability to find meaning in the advice that had been proffered.

"Consider the matter in this way," explained the sage. "When the stomach receives no food, the body suffers. If it retains whatever it is given, however, the result is indigestion."

"I begin to see," nodded the rich man. "The stomach is an inalienable part of an organism, and what it receives it must not hold back for itself."

"Quite right," affirmed the sage. "It receives and it gives."

"But what has that to do with me?" queried the rich man perplexedly.

"Are you not part of a larger organism called humanity?" asked the sage.

"Yes, I suppose so," said the rich man.

"You have received much," countered the sage, "but what have you given?"

The rich man was silent.

5. ASSUMPTIONS

A small Buddhist monastery was located on a dusty road, far from the haunts of men. Wandering monks who chanced to come this lonely way were hospitably received by the abbot. Some travelers, pleased with their lodgings, wished to continue their stay indefinitely, but the abbot was opposed. One concession, however, he did make. One monk could remain until he was defeated in a doctrinal debate by another wandering mendicant — in which case the one who lost the debate would have to leave the monastery.

There came a time when the resident monk was a one-eyed man who was not mentally very acute. Having little skill in disputation, he was always rather apprehensive of having to debate subtle doctrinal points with a newcomer.

Eventually a wandering monk came and challenged the resident to a contest concerning knowledge of metaphysical subtleties. The one-eyed monk became agitated and went to the abbot for counsel.

"The debate may be conducted either in words or by gestures," the abbot said. "In your case, gestures might be preferable."

"Yes, yes," the one-eyed monk hastened to agree. "That would be the best procedure."

A short time later, the one-eyed monk and the newcomer sat down in a quiet room to engage in a wordless debate.

A short time thereafter, a sudden commotion arose as the door was precipitately opened and the newcomer monk rushed out of the room. He went to the abbot immediately.

"I must confess defeat," the newly arrived monk declared. "That one-eyed scholar was too much for me."

The abbot responded with evident perplexity. "Is that so? Tell me what happened."

"After we sat down," explained the monk, "I held up one finger, signifying that we all rendered devotion to one person, namely the Buddha. Thereupon the one-eyed scholar held up two fingers, suggesting that the teaching given by the Buddha was an essential part of our spiritual legacy. I then held up three fingers, conveying the thought that the Buddha and his teaching were complemented by the monastic order that spread the doctrine abroad. At this, he raised his fist as though to say that everything proceeded from one great experience of enlightenment. I could think of nothing further and left."

The abbot pondered for a while on this unexpected turn of events and then went to visit the one-eyed monk.

"Tell me what happened when you debated the newcomer," the abbot requested.

"We had no sooner sat down than he held up one finger, meaning that I had but one eye. I thought this reference rather discourteous, but, wishing to be polite, I held up two, congratulating him that he, at least, had two eyes. Thereupon he held up three fingers, pointing out that between us we still had but three eyes. That was a little too much for me, so I raised a threatening fist. At this point, he suddenly rose and left the room."

The abbot smiled comprehendingly.

6. PERSPECTIVE OF THE FUTURE

"You speak of high ideals," complained a disciple to his teacher, "but the fact is that people are walking in fogs of illusion, perversity, and ignorance. What meaning does it have to talk of man's glorious destiny when he gropes his way uncomprehendingly in darkness?"

The teacher pointed to a clock.

"How am I supposed to interpret your gesture?" inquired the student.

"The hands of a clock always move forward," said the teacher pithily.

"True," responded the student, "but what of it?"

"The hands forever move away from past and present into the future," explained the teacher.

"I can see that the clock cuts out a bit of the future and makes it into the present," the student acknowledged.

"Many people live in the past and the present," declared the teacher, "and thereby limit themselves. They lack the perspective of the future."

"In what way is this tendency limiting?"

"The future pertains to consummation and the unfoldment of patterns," the teacher said. "Great revelations are concealed within its dimensions. Nothing can be evaluated without taking this third perspective of time into consideration. What the past nurtured can be revealed only by the future."

"Would you say, then," the student asked, "that the pain and suffering of today will find their justification in a distant tomorrow?"

"Certainly," nodded the teacher. "The meaning of the agonies and sufferings men undergo will, in time to come, be understood in terms of the purposes out of which they arose."

"It might even be said, then, that no one can make a final judgment regarding present and past trials and tribulations without considering the unknown perspective of the future."

The teacher nodded.

7. OF DEATH

In great perplexity a retired businessman came to the old philosopher.

"Why are you so agitated?" asked the old philosopher.

"My doctor has just informed me that I have a terminal illness and can't expect to live much longer."

"How do you react to such critical information?"

"It disturbs me terribly," declared the businessman. I've watched others undergo this ordeal, but it's altogether different now that I must face it. What do you think I should do?"

The old philosopher ruminated. "I suggest," he said at length, "that you spend a day in a cemetery, pondering on the great event that looms before you."

"A cemetery!" cried the businessman. "I'd much rather spend my time in a tavern."

"You gain little by refusing to think about it," the old philosopher countered. "After you've made your visit, come back and tell me your realizations."

The businessman went away, muttering under his breath, but he did follow the suggestion. Some time later he returned.

"I did as you suggested," he said, "but it was an unnerving experience."

"Tell me about it," invited the old philosopher.

"As I walked through the cemetery, I was filled with the thought that each day brings us one step closer to death. This is the final experience for everyone, whether he be rich or poor, great or insignificant. Filled with restless energy when alive, these denizens of the earth are still and quiet, being dead. What did their lives prove? Their joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, gains and losses — what did they mean?

Here they lie in death, the beggar just as good as the millionaire."

"You have realized that death strips away illusion," said the old philosopher, "and that is good — but it also adds new perspectives. I suggest that you return to the cemetery and ponder on this aspect of the matter."

The businessman grumbled, but followed the proffered advice. After a few days he paid another visit to his friend.

"I did as you said," he declared, "and have gained new insights. It seems to me that men generally equate life with existence in form and death with the dissolution of form. New definitions are in order. Life is; it uses forms but cannot be wholly defined by its vehicles. Forms appear and disappear as the wheel of time turns. The flower fades but the seed lives on. No man can lose his life, but he can lose the time-bound form. Before birth, there was life; after death, it remains. Death pertains to form, time, and existence in space. The light that penetrates a stained-glass window still remains when the latter is shattered."

"What conclusion do you draw from these realizations?" questioned the old philosopher.

"To identify oneself with the form side of existence is to be filled with a sense of futility. On the other hand, to identify oneself with the life-aspect is to become aware of the immortal essence that manifests for a brief period in the time-space continuum and is enriched by its sojourn."

The old philosopher smiled.

8. THE TREASURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

"If the world in which we live is but an illusion," an earnest young man questioned a scholar, "why do anything? Why tilt at windmills like Don Quixote?"

The scholar listened attentively. "Your assumption is correct," he said, "but your conclusion is not."

"The world is mediated to us through the senses," countered the young man, "and the senses are very imperfect recording instruments. Science tells us that all objects are composed of atoms, but we never see them."

"What you are saying is true," agreed the scholar, "but the qualities of mind and heart that are developed by struggling in this illusory world are of lasting worth."

"But such acquisitions are intangible," protested the young man.

"Such is the treasure of consciousness," affirmed the scholar. "This is the depository of true riches — riches that exceed by far the gold stored in vaults."

"You seem to be indicating several stages of development," said the young man thoughtfully. "At first the individual regards the world of appearances as real. Upon discovering his mistake, he becomes disillusioned. Finally he realizes that the treasure he seeks arises from his struggle with what is unreal and lies, therefore, within himself. Have I interpreted your thought correctly?"

"The qualities woven into one's nature by creative struggle," elaborated the scholar, "are more significant realities than any changes produced in outer circumstances."

"Many men seek material riches," said the young man, "but fewer seek what you call the treasure of consciousness."

"Quite right," approved the scholar.

9. DISABILITIES

"I have been inspired by spiritual writings, but I am unfortunately too old," said an elderly retired man to a teacher.

"The soul has no age," the teacher responded. "Years pertain to the body."

"I am also poor," the elderly man continued.

"You speak of material restrictions," said the teacher, "but we are concerned primarily about spiritual poverty."

"I should also say that I have no influence."

"Those who tread the spiritual way have often been obscure and little regarded," the teacher observed.

"What can I, an old man, possibly do that would make a difference?"

"Out of time and thought destiny is woven," the teacher pointed out. "Earthly edifices and monuments crumble into dust, but the temples and palaces built by aspiration are more lasting."

"But I have just enough breath to keep going."

"Out of breath a flute player creates a world of enchanting music," the teacher countered.

"Are all my disabilities, then, frailties of the body that weigh little in the life of the spirit?" the old man asked somewhat wistfully.

"You have said it," the teacher replied.

10. THE GLORY OF THE WHOLE WORLD

A student of occult lore came upon an enigmatic paragraph in the Emerald Tablets of Hermes. "Separate the earth from the fire," it read, "and the subtle from the gross; it ascends from earth to heaven, and again descends to earth . . . so hast thou the glory of the whole world."

He puzzled over these words for a long time, but to little avail. The meaning escaped him.

Finally he went to a mystic, showed him the paragraph in question, and asked for elucidation.

"Has it ever occurred to you," the mystic said after a pause, "that ocean water is unfit for human consumption whereas rainwater is not?"

"That is true," said the student, "but what does it have to do with the paragraph I showed you? The connection is unclear."

"Ocean water is briny and impotable," the mystic went on, ignoring the question, "but the vaporizing power of the sun draws moisture to a distant cloud, from whence it is eventually discharged upon the earth as nourishing rain."

The student showed signs of impatience and a wrinkle creased his brow.

"What you say is true, but not very helpful," he observed. "Why can't you be more explicit?"

"Specifically, then," replied the mystic, "what do you wish to know?"

"The paragraph admonishes us to separate the gross from the subtle. What does that mean?"

"The sun evaporates the ocean water, separating the brackish salt from the potable liquid," replied the mystic.

"Yes, but how do you explain 'ascends from earth to Heaven, and again descends to earth'?"

"The vapor rises to the clouds and then is poured forth as fructifying rain," the mystic rejoined.

After a moment's silence, the student declared, "Are you saying, then, that starving souls, by fiery aspiration, separate the impurities of earth from the flaming essences of Heaven, and when this has been done, the spiritual energies, like rain, are poured forth for the good of all mankind?"

The mystic did not answer, but his eyes smiled approval.

11. SELF AND NOT-SELF

"You have spoken of the Self and the Not-Self," commented a student to a metaphysician, "but I have not been able to follow your reasoning."

"Every person looks at the surrounding world through the prism of his own personality," explained the metaphysician. "That which he sees outside himself is termed the Not-Self."

"Isn't this opposition a form of dualism, even though many people are unaware of it?"

"In a sense, you are right," reflected the metaphysician, "but actually, there are three elements, namely, the Self, the Not-Self, and relation between the two."

"Could you explain in more specific terms?"

"Every human being is a unit that's related to everything else in the universe," the metaphysician remarked. "Life demands that he define the nature of that relationship."

"Would you say, then, that I am related to a star, for example?"

"Indeed, you are," affirmed the metaphysician.

"All my life I've been unconscious of such a relationship," observed the student, "and I think many other people are of the same mind."

"Such incognizance alters nothing," declared the metaphysician. "Human beings are also unaware of the complex chemical reactions involved in digesting food, but the processes occur nevertheless."

"What should be a person's relationship with the Not-Self?" questioned the student.

"A musician," answered the metaphysician, "uses an instrument to produce rhythmic tones. He can therefore be regarded as a symbol."

"I fail to understand you," said the student.

"He makes matter sing, does he not?" replied the metaphysician.

"Are you implying that every man is given the task of establishing a relationship between the Self and the Not-Self that is consonant, harmonious, and therefore musical?"

"Such an inference is justified," nodded the metaphysician.

12. PLACEBOS

A physician who was known for his long record of phenomenal cures was asked by reporters to reveal the secret of his success, but he refused to discuss the matter. Many years later, as he was about to retire, a friend brought up the same subject. This time the physician was more communicative.

"More than anything else, I administered placebos to my patients," the physician confessed, "and they were enormously effective."

"But placebos are harmless substances with no curative power!" cried the friend.

"Exactly," the physician confirmed. "A placebo may be nothing but sugar water. However, patients improve more when it has a foul smell and a bad taste."

"But how can you cure anyone by prescribing a substance that has no medical value?"

"Early in my career I realized that all ills are rooted in the mind, even if they manifest in the body," explained the metaphysician. "An itch in the toe, for example, is felt in the brain."

"And so you treated the mind rather than the body?" asked his friend.

"I regard the body as the outer coat of the mind," the physician went on. "The human form is but a precipitation of inner energies. What

a man thinks is more important than the house of flesh he carries about with him."

"But many doctors seem to believe that man is a combination of chemicals."

"I theorized that he is a congeries of thoughts rather than of material elements," reflected the physician. "Sometimes I think that the entire universe is a manifestation of a thought in the mind of the Great Creator."

"But your theories run counter to the beliefs of most practitioners of medicine," protested his friend.

"I am aware of that," that physician observed laconically.

"I can't help thinking that the majority of practitioners must be right and that your highly unorthodox theories are wrong," commented his friend.

"Perhaps," said the physician, "but how do you account for my cures?"

13. BLAME

A businessman poured his troubles into the ears of a metaphysician.

"Everything in my life is going wrong. My company is going bankrupt; my wife has asked for a divorce; my children insult me; and my doctor tells me I can expect a heart attack if I don't relax. As for my background, I come from a broken family. I couldn't stand the discipline my mother imposed, so I ran away from home before graduating from elementary school."

The metaphysician looked at him quizzically for a long moment and then asked, "What has brought you here?"

The businessman frowned. "Haven't I just been telling you why I've come to see you?"

"Think again," suggested the metaphysician.

"Well, when I consider the matter," reflected the businessman, "society has dealt badly with me. I'm simply a casualty of my environment."

"Are you saying that you yourself had nothing to do with the misfortunes that have befallen you?" questioned the metaphysician.

"I wouldn't go that far," demurred the businessman, "but I do think I've been the victim of circumstances."

"Do you believe that every effect is justly proportioned to its cause?"

"Why, yes. Every effect must have a cause. That's quite clear."

"You are a bundle of effects brought into being by causes which you yourself initiated," the metaphysician explained.

"I'm not quite sure I understand," said the businessman.

"You yourself have woven the robe of your destiny, thread by thread, by every choice and every decision you ever made," the metaphysician said.

"You mean that I am personally responsible for the mess in which I find myself?"

"Life situations are spun out of the yarn that we provide," the metaphysician observed. "Our choices become causes that prompt life to manifest appropriate effects."

"That theory is hard for me to accept," said the businessman. "I gain much of my confidence by blaming others for my troubles. Now you say that I must blame myself."

"You cannot change others," the metaphysician pointed out, "but you can change yourself. Every knot you have made you can unravel."

"True," said the businessman, "but you're asking me to take off the spectacles I've worn all my life. What will I see when I remove them?"

"The light that was always there," replied the metaphysician.

14. LIGHT QUOTAS

At a conclave that was held on the resplendent star, Polaris, the gods who determine the light needs of the Cosmos made a disturbing announcement.

"The Earth," said a communique, "has been failing to meet the minimal standards of light emission in the solar system. For a long time this planet has received far more light than it has radiated — an unbalanced condition that calls for a radical readjustment."

"If the Earth can't measure up to long-accepted standards," the representative of Polaris said, "there may be need for drastic action. Even a slight shifting of the pole would be troublesome enough to bring the Earthlings to their senses."

"Perhaps they are unaware of their cosmic responsibility to supply their quota of light to the solar system," said Venus. "It's possible that they're simply more ignorant than other planetary bodies."

"They're retarded, that's what they are," put in Saturn. "I think they're deliberately in arrears and have no intention of contributing to the Universal Light Fund."

"For many eons, now," reflected Jupiter, "the Earth has been swinging in space. It would be a pity to cut short her career without informing the Earthlings of their solar delinquencies and allowing them to decide whether they will comply with the Law of Light Radiation that governs the rest of us."

"They have never learned to speak our language," said one of the Pleiads. "How, then, can we communicate with them?"

"We'll speak in a language they can understand," said Vulcan. "I'll activate a few earthquakes; Jupiter will create droughts and floods; and the Sun will scorch selected areas."

"Don't you think such action will inspire the Earthlings to correct

the balance between light importation and exportation?"

"If they begin to think in solar terms, yes," replied Saturn, "but not if they continue to remain geocentric as has long been their wont."

15. REFUSING TO PASS ON

Amid the quiet of a dimly lit library, a seminary student fell into a conversation with a research scholar. In the course of their verbal exchange, they touched upon the mystery associated with death.

"I must confess that it is difficult to explain why a person in the prime of life should be cut down suddenly and without warning, while money-grubbers live to a ripe old age," observed the seminarian.

"It was not always so," said the research scholar. "There was a time — very long ago, to be sure — when men could choose the very hour of their going."

"I never heard of that," exclaimed the seminarian. "What is the source of your information?"

"Some time ago I found a manuscript, yellowed with age, that describes the process. It says that the moment of death was decided upon by each man at the behest of his soul. When the particular purpose of an incarnation was fulfilled, he would will to be translated to the next dimension of consciousness."

"It must have been a great privilege to make such a fateful decision," commented the seminarian, "but what caused this method to be changed?"

"As you know, human beings are willful and unpredictable creatures," explained the research scholar. "Many people refused to die at the appointed time. They clung desperately to life and would not leave this plane of endeavor."

"That must have posed a problem," the seminarian reflected.

"Indeed, it did," declared the research scholar. "People who refused to die grew older and older. Instances are known where some persons lived more than a thousand years. They became enfeebled and decrepit, scarcely able to totter about, and yet they refused to move on to the next plane."

"Didn't this state of affairs produce a population problem?" queried the seminarian.

"The whole world was crawling with people. You can imagine what it was like by realizing that the birth rate remained normal while the death rate became negligible. There wasn't enough food to feed the vast numbers of inhabitants."

"How was the problem resolved?" asked the seminarian.

"It was at about this time that the Great Flood came," said the research scholar. "When it was over, a new order was instituted — and man no longer had the right to choose the time of his earthly departure."

"It seems rather logical," admitted the seminarian. "Man abused a privilege, and it was taken from him."

"And so it is today," declared the research scholar.

16. THE PATH OF SMOKE

A businessman often discussed diverse matters with his wife, who had a metaphysical bent of mind. One day he came home from a lecture with a puzzled look on his face.

"You seem perplexed about something," his wife observed.

"Why, yes," the businessman acquiesced. "I just heard a lecturer speaking about the Path of Smoke. I couldn't imagine what he was talking about."

"In what connection did he use that phrase?" his wife asked.

"He said that all human suffering is a fire from which smoke ascends to the heights."

"Smoke is the release of volatile essences through the agency of fire," reflected his wife. "Flame destroys form and color. Gray ash remains on earth, and gray smoke ascends upward."

"That may be so," said her husband, "but what connection do you see between suffering and a conflagration?"

"Isn't all suffering a kind of conflagration?" questioned his wife. "Pain is indeed a form of burning, as anyone who suffers knows. It also turns the bright and rosy colors of ambition into a dull shade of gray."

"What have these speculations," countered her husband, "even if true, to do with the Path of Smoke?"

"Fire and smoke," replied his wife, "have always been related. On the physical level, the connection is clear. If pain is a psychological kind of fire, shouldn't there be an invisible kind of smoke arising from the burning out of impurities and imperfections?"

"That's a strange hypothesis," said her husband slowly, "and yet, since pain is invisible, the smoke it produces should also be unseen."

"Perhaps pain suffered by humanity everywhere," speculated his wife, "rises to the heights as the volatile essence that has escaped from the form-life."

"Would you say, then," said her husband, "that the path of suffering might be called the Path of Smoke and that it moves from the lower depths to the highest heights?"

"Such a conclusion would be warranted," his wife agreed.

"Then the Path of Suffering would be a burning ground that leads to the Highest."

"I suspect that you have just defined the meaning of the Path of Smoke," his wife concluded.

17. ACTIVE REPOSE

A tourist visiting a strange country took a stroll before dinner. As he wandered through a grove, he came upon a man sitting very quietly in a secluded nook. The sitting figure seemed to be lost in thought. The tourist stopped and watched him for a while.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, the tourist broke the silence. "Why are you out here doing nothing?"

The seated figure slowly returned to an awareness of his surroundings and recollected himself. "I disagree with your assumption," he said finally.

"Assumption?" queried the tourist, "what assumption?"

"You said I was doing nothing," the other responded.

"Well, isn't it true?"

"That depends on your values," said the seated figure. "In your terms I am doing nothing; in mine, much."

"How can that be? asked the tourist rather perplexed. "It seems to me that you are immobile, not even lifting a finger."

"You think in physical terms. Action may also be mental and spiritual."

"Can you explain to me how you are acting while sitting quietly in this grove?" the tourist asked.

"Then let me enlighten you," said the other. "I am creating in space rainbows composed of the gossamer strands of lighted thought. Again, I am turning the wheel of aspiration so that the spark at the hub becomes a flame. At other times, I am depositing bright essences into the spiritual reservoir that nourishes the human race. In addition, I am plucking the delicate strings of the world lute whose tinkling sounds echo in the hearts of all seekers. I purify space by breathing forth reiterated prayers. Standing on a mountaintop, imaginatively speaking, I send forth light and hope to all who suffer among the sons of men."

The tourist drew back in wonder and perplexity. He hurried back to the hotel and told the manager that dangerous men were abroad who confuse the mind and trouble the soul.

18. THREE FATES

The Fates, mythology informs us, presided over human destiny. They were the daughters of Law (Themis). The first Fate spun the thread and thus provided the substance that her sisters used. The second Fate measured justly the fiber provided. Finally, the third Fate cut the thread at a specifically determined point.

At birth, man is provided with a body. During the course of a life-

time, he weighs and measures all experiences in the scales of Justice. When the body has served the purpose for which it was created, it is cast aside. The thread of life, it can thus be seen, is spun, measured, and cut.

In every age there are persons who provide it with creative ideas that further the evolutionary drive forward, those who translate these ideals into realities, and those who repudiate them when they are no longer serviceable.

The past provides each individual with a body and an environment. In the ever-present now he must measure his deed against his needs. The future sets a limit to his activities, bringing them to a certain end.

In the beginning there is the seed. It must be nurtured so that it grows and develops. In due time, the harvesters reap the ripened fruit. Three processes may be distinguished — the planting of the seed, the development of the plant, and the harvesting of the fruit.

19. ETHICS OF THE FLAME

The flame forever rises heavenward. Whenever it burns, it gives light and warmth. In the midst of the greatest darkness it persistently shines. Everlastingly it is engaged in the task of transmuting substance into fiery essence. It is a perpetual symbol of a world of energy that contradicts and repudiates the inert world of matter. It is representative of an ethereal realm in the dense domain of ponderable things. Moreover, it is a prophet of the eventual transmutation of matter into radiant light. it comes in many forms — as the lightning, the dawn, the beacon of the lighthouse. These are outer manifestations. Inwardly it pulsates in the creative mind and coruscates in the benevolent heart. As pain, it scorches, as joy it uplifts, as death it transmutes. Each human being is a flame that burns ever more brightly until it achieves the beneficent radiance of a star.

20. A CHOICE OF PATHS: SMOKE OR FIRE

Each life is a burning attended by smoke and fire.

To which do we give allegiance — to billowing smoke that clouds the atmosphere with acrid fumes, or to the brilliant flame that changes heavy form to bright and shining essence?

The clouds that rise from the burning fuel obscure the sight, defining no perceptible path. He who wanders in this gloom chases shadows, and though he struggles mightily, gathers naught in his journeying save a futile wisp of cloud that dissolves and leaves but soot

upon his hand. This is the Path of Smoke — and it is dark, acrid, and bitter.

Quite different is the experience of him who eschews the smoke and chooses the flame. He passes from light to light. The flame burns out the dross within him and in the process reveals the silver path that leads to the portals of gold. He himself becomes a living flame and sheds a radiance abroad. This is the Path of Fire — and it is beautiful in the journeying and beautiful in the consummation.

And each man, whoever he be, must choose the one or the other. Even at this moment, behold the billowing smoke and the aspiring flame!

21. THE DISCIPLESHIP

After years of striving, study, and meditation, the disciple was asked a probing question by his teacher.

"What have you learned?"

"I have learned to give thanks," the disciple replied after a reflective pause. "At first I was grateful for all I had been given, but after a time I became thankful for all that had been taken away. Thus has my gratitude grown, nor can it know diminution. There is no day on which I cannot express my thanks — if not for what it gives, then certainly for what it takes away. Either I increase my wisdom or diminish my ignorance. What I gain in courage I lose in fear. Therefore my gain is loss, and my loss, gain. Thus do I establish equilibrium, and in everything give thanks."

The teacher nodded and smiled.

22. ATTIRE

The teacher, commenting on the threadbare coat of his disciple, asked, "How should a wise man dress?"

The disciple pondered the question before answering. "The stars," he said, "are clad in light, a garment of surpassing beauty. The trees dress themselves in leaves of green, the flowers in vivid colors, but the mountain is content to wear a hat of clouds and snow."

"What about a human being?" the teacher asked.

"Emulating the stars, he should clothe himself in light," the disciple replied.

"How can he do so?"

"If he sets the lamp of wisdom in his head agleam, and lights the candle of compassion in his heart, he will indeed be clothed in beauty. Thus can he shine like the stars and diffuse a comforting radiance upon the world."

23. DESTINATION

"Where are you going?" the teacher once asked his disciple.

"To infinity," he replied.

"How so?" his teacher asked.

"Small purposes tell us that we go from here to there, but large purposes suggest a different destination. From the finite we go to the infinite, from time to eternity, and from the visible to the invisible, from dense matter to impalpable spirit, from wingless earth to rainbowed heaven. Some persons are aware of their destination while others unknowingly trudge the roads, defining their going by small purposes that take no account of large perspectives. Where one is going may be more a matter of the head than of the feet. Many believe they go from birth to death, but I maintain that we proceed from life imprisoned to life unlimited."

24. SIGNATURE ON THE SKY

A sage and his disciple were walking along a beautiful country road. Suddenly a rainbow took shape in the sky. Pausing, the sage pointed to the vivid arc of color that spread across the firmament.

"Behold the rainbow," he said. "Note that it rises from dense earth to the very heights of heaven. It is built, like thought, out of the most delicate vapors. Earth and heaven it unites in a many-colored arch of beauty. This symbol is the divine signature written on the sky. The arc you see is but half the complete circle; the other half lives in the invisible. It is an outer sign of the inner arch that each aspiring soul must construct. As nature employs light to create this phenomenon, we use thought. Shape your life not as a fierce thundercloud, but as a vivid rainbow that bestows a gift of beauty and joy upon the world."

25. A FILLED VESSEL

A young man in search of wisdom came to a sage. The latter welcomed him warmly.

As time passed, the young disciple began to find fault with the counsel he was given. He believed, it seemed clear, that he knew more than the sage to whom he had come in order to gain wisdom.

One day master and disciple were having tea. The young man lifted his cup while the older man held the pot.

The sage poured the tea, filling the cup by degrees. The liquid rose in the receptacle and reached the half-way mark, the three-quarter mark, and finally the brim — and still the teacher continued to pour.

Finally the tea overflowed and fell to the floor, while some wetted the trousers of the disciple.

"Can't you see that the cup is full?" angrily queried the disturbed young man. "Why do you continue to pour liquid into a filled vessel?"

The sage's eyes gleamed ever so lightly. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "You are indeed right. There is as little use in pouring tea into a filled cup as there is in adding ideas to an already filled mind. Both tea and ideas are thus wasted."

26. CONSULTING THE ELEMENTS

"How can I gain a larger measure of wisdom?" the disciple asked his teacher.

"Consult the elements," the latter advised him quietly, and would say no more.

Months passed. One day the teacher asked the disciple, "Have you followed my instructions?"

When the disciple answered in the affirmative, the teacher inquired, "What did you learn?"

"I consulted the four elements, namely, Fire, Water, Earth, and Air," the disciple declared, "and each taught me something about life. The Earth said, 'I am but soil, and yet if you put a seed within me, it will grow into a flaming flower. I am the mud of rich possibilities, and in my depths lies prophecy of the heights. I am the lowest pole of Spirit, the density, where man gathers strength to project himself into the realm of my brother Spirit.'"

"Then I consulted Water. It said, 'I move from Heaven to Earth, just as my brother Fire moves from Earth to Heaven. Compassion prompts me incessantly to nourish all living things. Nothing is too small or insignificant, for I feed the tiniest blade of thirsting grass. When Cold contacts me, I become transformed and put on a beautiful crystalline garment, but when Heat enlarges my being, I become an invisible but fiery essence. At times I rise high in the air and curl up in banks of cloud, while again, as fog, I hover close to Earth. As a stream I run forever to the sea, as the part ever seeks to find and unite with the whole. I am one and many, material and immaterial, actual and symbolic. As the dewdrop slips noiselessly into the shining sea, so may man merge into the ocean of essence.'"

"Next I communed with Air. 'I transport Sound and sustain Fire,' it said. 'Invisible though I am, I shake the world. A symbol am I of the unseen mover that moves all things. The flaming thoughts of man I blow across the Earth to kindle quenchless fires of the spirit. In Spring I come to attend the awakening of Nature, and in Winter, with icy blasts, I cleanse the Earth, destroying the infectious thoughts that encumber space. I can be gentle or rude, pleasant or terrifying, boisterous or quiet. I am the

unknown, the unanticipated disturber of settled things. Freedom I crave, yet immutable law I follow. I create and I destroy, fulfilling my part in the greater design of Life.'"

"Finally, I spoke to Fire. 'I burn both in distant skies and in the human heart. Everywhere I am a transforming agent, changing sluggish matter into flaming essence. Mine is the gift of Light which forever opposes darkness, and thereby makes life possible. I sleep in the atom and flame forth in the sun and stars. All things move toward the fiery state. As man now lives in Light, he must one day live in Fire. Thought and Love are aspects of the Flame, and so are aspiration, prayer and sacrifice. Man's dwelling in Light is but a preparation for living in the realm of Fire. The destiny of man is Flame. Aspiration is a burning that gives forth endless Light. Thus does the world move inevitably to the divine conflagration in which all lesser fires merge with the Eternal Fire of God.'"

"Thus have I learned," said the disciple. "This is what the elements have taught me."

27. THE MESSENGER WHO FORGOT

In remote solitude, a hermit addressed a young disciple.

"You have been with me two years," the hermit said, "and the time has come for you to enter a new stage. In short, you must return to the haunts of men, but you go now as a messenger."

The young man nodded agreement.

"A messenger, however," continued the hermit, "bears a message. Yours is quite simple. Tell the people that joy of the spirit enlarges the meaning of life. Do you understand?

"It's simple enough," the disciple agreed.

Bidding his teacher adieu, the young man prepared for the journey. He had to travel through hot deserts, dense forests, and brigand-infested wilds. Undeterred by the many dangers that beset him, the young man finally reached the haunts of civilization.

When he stood before the first crowd that listened to him, he made an astonishing discovery. He could not remember the message. Try as he might, he could not recall what his teacher had told him to say. Instead he spoke about the delights of pleasure — and gained a host of followers. But ever and anon he felt inwardly disturbed, for he was dimly aware that he had failed to remember the message.

28. ADVENTURES OF A YOUNG MAN

After wandering for many days in desolate country, a young man found himself at the foot of a mountain. It rose majestically into the

air, the summit encased in heavy clouds. After surveying its cragged sides, the young man began to climb the rocky slopes. He had gone more than halfway to the top when he came upon a plateau.

What he saw here astonished him greatly. The plateau was the scene of much activity. All sorts of scientific instruments were strewn about here and there, and a number of men were busily engaged operating them.

No one took much notice of the newcomer. The young man walked over to one of the men who worked with such intensity that his face was covered with sweat.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

After a moment the other answered, but yet he continued his strenuous work.

"We are cleaning space," he said succinctly.

"What is polluting it?" the young man asked somewhat perplexed, for he could perceive nothing particularly wrong with the atmosphere.

"The thoughts of the human race," the other explained, "have caused heavy deposits of spatial slime, and we must work day and night to neutralize these effects."

"Is human thinking that bad?" the young man asked wonderingly.

"It gets worse all the time," the other informed him. "Some of my friends are trying to prevent earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, and other calamities that human thought has engendered, but there is a point beyond which we cannot help."

"Couldn't we get humanity to cooperate?" the young man wanted to know.

"We've sent large-souled teachers to persuade humanity to do so, but few people wish to accept the responsibility for polluting space with dark and loathesome thoughts."

Then and there the young man decided that he would bring this matter to the attention of his people when he returned home.

29. COOPERATION

Limping haltingly along a dusty road in the heat of the sun, a lame man came upon a blind one who gropingly tapped with his cane to prevent himself from falling into a ditch.

The two men struck up a conversation.

"I see the direction in which to go very well," commented the lame man, "but I can't walk."

"I can walk quite well," said the blind man, "but I can't see."

"Perhaps we can help each other," suggested the lame man. "I can give you sight and you can give me strength."

After further conversation, the lame man mounted the shoulders of the blind one, and together they made their way — like body and soul — to their destination.

30. PRESSURE OF A WATERFALL

After searching for a teacher many years, a young man found one. For a period of six months, however, the disciple received no instruction of any kind. At last the young man approached his teacher.

"You have taught me nothing during the last six months," the disciple complained.

"Instruction is not given in words only," the teacher replied mildly. "However, I shall assign you a special task. Tomorrow I should like to have you sit all day by yonder waterfall and study it."

After the young man had spent a long day contemplating the cascading water, he returned to the sage.

"I am not sure I know what I was supposed to learn," the young man said in some perplexity. "I saw a huge mass of water falling over the steep rocks and swirling about in boiling eddies below. It was a beautiful sight, but the meaning of it escapes me."

"Did the water ever cease to flow even for an instant?"

"No, it did not," the young man replied.

"What caused it to rush so impetuously and so incessantly?"

"Pressure," the young man declared, "unending pressure."

"Quite right, the teacher nodded. "Now do you see what you must do to develop spiritually?"

The young man was lost in thought for a long moment. "You mean I must create in myself a constant and relentless pressure that pushes me forward with the same impetuosity that characterizes the waterfall?"

The teacher smiled approval.

31. THE OPPOSITES: SUCCESS AND FAILURE

A certain man had two sons, one of whom was very selfish and the other exceedingly idealistic and good-hearted.

Strangely enough, the selfish one, because he was shrewd in his own interests, prospered, but the idealistic did not.

One day the good-hearted son spoke to his father about this paradox.

"Why do I generally fail, even though I wish to do good, while my brother succeeds, even though he acts out of selfish motives?"

The father, after pondering the question, replied, "His success is a form of failure, whereas your failure is a form of success."

32. THE PHOENIX AND THE FIRE

The phoenix, after emerging renewed in vigor from the fire, was interviewed by a reporter who had witnessed the event.

"What was the experience like?" the reporter inquired.

"The hardest part came at the beginning," rejoined the phoenix. "I had to control my imagination, for I cherished a doubt that the fire might burn me to a crisp instead of restoring me to youth and strength."

"Your doubt was in no way justified, then?"

"Not in the least," the phoenix replied. "Fire is a curious element. If you think it's hostile, it will become so; and if you think it's friendly, it will assuredly act accordingly. As soon as I treated the fire as a friend, it embraced, cleansed, and invigorated me. Now I am ready for the next hundred years."

33. THE LION AND THE UNICORN

Wherever the lion went, the unicorn would follow. The other animals became accustomed to seeing them both together. The lion, to be sure, disliked being followed in this way and made his disapproval evident.

"Why are you always following me about?" he asked petulantly.

"I do you no harm," the unicorn replied mildly.

"Don't act as though you were my conscience," the lion roared. "I want to do as I please, not feel that you're always analyzing whether I'm acting justly or properly."

"You ought to be glad someone is taking an interest in you," the unicorn responded quietly. "After all, you don't want to grow up a bully, do you?"

"I will if I want to," the lion growled. "I'll do whatever I wish, and you're not going to stop me."

"I'm not so sure about that," the unicorn said very calmly, sharpening its great horn on a stone.

This remark infuriated the lion. He attacked the unicorn with savage ferocity. Long and hard they fought. The roar of the lion could be heard for miles. It is said by some persons that the fight raged on for seven hours. At the end of that time the lion was panting desperately with fatigue. His eyes were rather glazed, and there were innumerable holes in his skin where the unicorn's horn had pierced it.

Eventually the struggle was over, and the once proud lion lay on the ground begging for mercy. The unicorn was magnanimous in victory. In fact, he bathed the other's wounds and helped him recover.

"If you follow your own stubborn self-will, you're bound to get hurt," the unicorn explained. "I happen to be that part of yourself that you don't want to listen to, but I'm really interested in your own good. This bloody struggle really wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't been so self-willed and conceited."

After that, the unicorn and the lion got on so amicably that a statue was erected to them in which they stood on opposite sides of a crown.

34. THE INTERRUPTED VISION

A saint prayed with great intensity over a period of many years. Finally a vision came to him. A beautiful angel, shining and golden, appeared before his wondering eyes. In awe, he threw himself at the feet of the angelic being in reverential worship.

At this moment a bell sounded. Someone, quite evidently, needed his help.

The saint hesitated. Should he leave the visionary figure and go forth to help a brother in need? Was not spiritual communion more important than ministration to the needy? Would he not gain more inspiration by staying than by going?

Reluctantly he arose and left. He found a brother in need, gave him the desired help, and returned.

The saint noted with joy that the vision was still there.

"I was overjoyed to find you here when I returned from my mission," the saint declared fervently.

Then the angel spoke. "If you had not gone to help a brother in need, I should have had to leave."

35. LOGICAL DILEMMA

A king who was deeply concerned about truth gave orders to his border guards. Whoever entered his country should be asked the question, "Where are you going?" If the newcomer told the truth, he was to be allowed to proceed, but if he told a lie, he was to be hanged.

All went well for a time until a Sophist entered the king's domain.

"Where are you going?" he was asked.

"I am going to be hanged," he declared.

This answer caused great confusion. If the stranger were not hanged, he lied, and therefore ought to be hanged. On the other hand, if he were hanged, he told the truth and should be permitted to go in peace.

36. PRESENT BY INVISIBLE

An ancient legend tells us of a teacher whose young charge asked him to explain how God could be everywhere and yet never be seen.

The teacher showed the pupil a basin of water and poured salt into the basin.

"Now taste the water," he said.

The pupil did so and pronounced it salty.

"Taste it from each side of the basin," the teacher requested.

"On every side it tastes equally salty," the pupil said.

"The salt is everywhere present," declared the teacher, "but you

cannot see it. So it is with the divine essence. It is not visible, but you can taste it with your heart."

37. EQUAL RIGHTS

The animals, meeting in conclave, signed a petition that they be granted all the rights to which human beings are entitled.

"I'm just as greedy as men," commented a pig.

"And I'm just as sly," commented the fox.

"And I'm just as cruel," a tiger chimed in.

38. BY YOUR GOD

A king was told that a certain hermit taught atheism.

The ruler had the anchorite brought before him. "I have been told on good authority that you reject the existence of God," the king declared. "Is this true?"

"I swear by your God that it is not," was the reply.

"By my God?" queried the king rather perplexed. "Is your God different from mine?"

"It is my custom," the hermit explained, "to speak to each man according to *his* God and not to wish my conception of deity upon him. For this reason, perhaps, I have been accused of heresy. Whoever comes to me I address in terms of *his*, not my, highest visions of life."

The king was so impressed that he shortly afterward became a disciple of the hermit.

39. DUSTING OFF TRUTHS

What one age knows, another forgets. Unless ideas are periodically taken from the shelf of thought and examined, they gather dust and decay. The following instance is illustrative.

"Do good," was the admonition of a great teacher.

"Do good to others," quoted his disciples.

"Do good to others as long as it doesn't hurt you," was the phrasing of the next generation.

"Do good to men," the third generation repeated.

"Do good to those who can help you," was the maxim of the fourth.

"Do good if it's more profitable than to do wrong," became the watchword of the fifth generation.

"Do as you please," said the seventh.

Each generation believed it was repeating what the great teacher had taught.

40. BELIEFS OF A SAGE

"What is your doctrine?" a visitor once asked a sage. "I would like to write an article about your beliefs."

"Space is my doctrine," the sage replied. "It contains everything."

"Won't you be more specific?" the visitor queried, finding the sage's answer rather enigmatic.

"All paths I honor, as long as they lead to the summit of the mountain where the Treasure of the World can be found. To reach it, one must convert every falsehood into a truth, every pain into a joy, every slice of darkness into its quintessential radiance. When the traveler thinks his destination is without, it is within; and when he concludes that it is within it is without; and finally he will understand that he must follow the rainbow that gleams in his heart. He carries with him a pair of scales, yet knows that a grain of light outweighs a ton of darkness. His creed is comprised in striving, and while he forever tames dragons, from his hands fall jewels of light. Have I forgotten anything?"

The questioner was silent.

41. AN APPLICANT EVALUATED

A fox, a wolf, and a parrot formed a lodge for mutual protection.

A dog, hearing of this, asked to join. The original founders came together to discuss the newcomer's qualifications.

"He's too sly," said the fox.

"He's far too greedy to suit me," the wolf added.

"I think he's a chatterbox," the parrot chimed in.

42. LAWS AND THE STATE

"How should a nation be governed?" a sage was asked. "With many laws or no laws?"

"To govern by many laws is the way of restriction and restraint," he answered. "To govern with no laws is the way of license and anarchy. The ideal state should have more laws than would breed anarchy, and fewer laws than would cause oppression. The right measure lies between "too many" and "too few."

43. COMPLAINT AND REPENTANCE

In a certain town there lived two men.

The first was an honest man who had the reputation of being a thief.

The second was a thief who had the reputation of being an honest man.

The honest man, brooding on the injustices done him, became a thief.

The thief, smitten in conscience by the wrongs he had done others, became an honest man.

The one was concerned with the wrongs others had done him; the second, with the wrongs he had done others — two meditations with vastly different consequences.

44. DIVERGING PATHS

When the man-of-invincible-ignorance meets the man-of-transcendent-wisdom, the ensuing conversation is punctuated by opposing views:

"I believe in nothing," says the man-of-invincible-ignorance.

"That's your first belief," the other observes.

"I can't be convinced of anything," the first asserts.

"You have already proved to yourself apparently that you have an 'I' that holds convictions."

"I'd rather have pleasure with widsom than wisdom without pleasure."

"Pleasure pursued far enough yields pain, but wisdom brings shadowless joy."

45. CRITICISM

A student came to his teacher with a long list of complaints about the behavior and conduct of a third person.

The teacher listened patiently while the young man poured forth his grievances. Having unburdened himself, the young man came to a pause. Only then did the teacher have an opportunity to speak.

"When you criticize someone," he remarked, "you do so for one of three reasons: to help the person criticized, to warn others, or to educate yourself. Inasmuch as you are scarcely helping the person you accuse of wrong-doing, nor are you presenting information which I do not already know, I trust that you are making good progress in self-education."

46. GRATITUDE FOR THE UNKNOWN

Much was done for me today of which I am unaware.

The furnaces of the sun were well stoked.

The massive earth was orbitally hurled through space by a giant hand.

Time and space granted me another day to garner the fruits of earthly experience.

Beings unknown to me labored in my behalf.
The unalterable laws of the universe functioned with model precision.
An upholding will sustained the whole creation.
Ought I not be grateful for that of which I know nothing?

47. THE MASK OF THE APPRENTICE

A man looked into the mirror and discovered that he was ugly. His hair was coarse and stringy, his eyes bloodshot and ox-like, his skin blotchy, his hands gnarled, and his posture ungainly.

Greatly disturbed, he ran to his master.

"Master, I have looked into the mirror and seen how ugly I am," he said. "What can I do about it?"

The master stroked his beard.

"Many people never achieve that knowledge," he commented after a moment's thought.

"Is there nothing I can do to overcome my ugliness?" the man pleaded.

Taking a block of fine wood that lay in one corner of the room, the master gave it to the man.

"Take this wood and create a beautiful mask so that it may cover your face," he said. "Here is a carving knife."

The man did as he was told. With all diligence he worked at the task assigned. He spent years making the mask a thing of beauty. With the greatest artistry he lovingly shaped the wood into the desired form. When at long last he was satisfied, he showed it to his master.

"You have done good work," the master said.

"May I wear it now?" the man asked.

"First look at yourself in the mirror," the master advised.

The man did so — and behold, his own face was a duplicate of the mask he had fashioned, and both were beautiful. He looked at the master in astonishment.

"You molded yourself when you shaped your mask," the master explained. "What is outwardly done is inwardly reflected."

48. A QUESTION OF VERACITY

One thief was passing out counterfeit money, whereas a second was selling stolen goods.

Believing each other to be honest, they exchanged wares.

When they were later arrested, the first thief protested that he had unknowingly purchased stolen goods; the second maintained that he had been receiver, not the maker, of the counterfeit money found in his possession.

Both told the truth, but was the truth a form of deception?

49. THE SINGLE EYE

Three archers tested their skill by shooting at a target.

The first archer shot altogether wide of the mark.

The second sent his arrow into the third circle.

The third hit the bull's-eye.

The participants were then asked what occupied their thoughts just before they let their arrows fly.

"I was thinking about the spectators," the first confessed, "and how they would jeer me if I failed."

"I was thinking about the ovation I'd get if I succeeded," the second admitted.

"I thought of nothing but the bull's-eye," the third declared.

50. HIDING PLACE

In the beginning, when the gods were about to create man, they spent much time discussing the various qualities with which he should be endowed. They all agreed that he should have courage, strength, and intelligence, but when one of the gods proposed to confer a soul upon him, there was some disagreement.

"If he finds his soul too soon," one god pointed out, "he will achieve more power than is good for him. Indeed, he may become proud — and hence, destructive."

"Then, let us make it difficult for him to find it," someone suggested.

They all agreed. One proposed that it be placed on a mountaintop, but another immediately countered that man would soon climb it. Another suggested that the soul be hidden at the bottom of the deepest sea, but this proposal found little favor.

Finally, someone said, "Let's hide man's soul within him. He will not be likely to look for it there, and when he does, he will already have gained some measure of wisdom."

And so it was done.

51. THE CAT AND THE BEDPOST

A pious old man made it a point to spend some time each day in meditation and prayer. He would sit on the floor of his bedroom each morning, uplift his thoughts, and try to shut out everything external.

The family cat, however, showed a strange interest in his devotions. No sooner had he seated himself than she would approach, rub her furry body playfully against him, and mew approvingly. Whether or not she wanted to be taught this process of meditation, no one knows, but the

old man did not find that her behavior improved the quality of his prayers. Day after day she exasperated him until he hit upon an expedient.

He tied the cat to the bedpost before he began to meditate. In this manner he preserved himself from her unreasonable interruption. In time, it became customary to dispose of the cat in this way before he sat down to pray.

The sons of the old man carefully observed him. They, too, when they meditated, followed the same procedure and tied the cat to the bedpost.

Times changed, and the tempo of living became quicker, the demand for haste and hurry more pronounced. The descendants of the old man, in order to save time, dispensed with meditation and simply tied the cat to the bedpost — firmly believing that they were thereby performing their religious duty in the spirit of their revered ancestor.

52. DIVINE PATIENCE

A young man who had been with a sage for a year complained about his lack of progress.

"How little I have learned in twelve months," he grumbled. "What do I have to show for all the time I've spent with you? Your teachings do not seem to have brought about any great transformation in my nature. Isn't something radically wrong?"

The sage opened a book and showed his disciple a page containing a geological chart of the earth.

"Take a look," he advised, "at the manner in which the earth has been shaped and reshaped. The Pre-Cambrian period, you will observe, covered a period of about three billion years. The following era — the Paleozoic — continued for about sixty-five million years. The Mesozoic lasted one hundred and sixty-five million years. Finally the Cenozoic covered a span of sixty-six million years. These figures spell out the divine patience — the endurance that is written into the mountain, hills, and rocks."

The sage and his disciple pondered on these vast cycles of time and considered the antiquity of their surroundings.

"How long did you say you've been with me?" the sage then asked.

The young man said no more, but went thoughtfully on his way.

53. PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

A young scholar dreamed of helping all humanity. Before doing anything, however, he thought he ought to have a thorough knowledge of tongues.

Day and night he studied the languages of the world in order that he might better serve those who spoke them.

Twenty years passed and he was still studying.

"When will you begin to act?" his friends asked.

"There are still fifteen languages of which I know nothing," the scholar replied. "How can I help unless I have mastered them?"

Another score of years went by, and still he burrowed among his books. His friends again inquired when he intended to use the vast knowledge he had accumulated.

"Now that I understand the languages of the world," the scholar said, shaking his head sadly, "I am too old to do anything at all."

54. POSSESSIONS

My first concern in life is possessions," a businessman explained to a philosopher. "Before I devote myself to philosophical discussions about the soul, I must first consider my material needs."

"Exactly what are your possessions?" the philosopher queried. "You don't even own your own body, for it was lent you by your parents and will have to be returned when your lease expires. In a shorter time than you think, all your belongings will be in the hands of your heirs; so that whatever you give up now you will not have to reassign later. The soul and the garland woven by your thoughts are your true possessions, for only these are permanently yours. If you think otherwise, beware lest your possessions control you instead of your controlling them."

55. NOT YET AND TOO LATE

A certain scholar had such splendid talents that all his friends expected him to achieve a great reputation and make an outstanding contribution to letters. Often they would ask him how he intended to use his learning, and he would reply that he was collecting materials for a book.

"As the years passed, his friends would inquire, "have you written your book?"

"Not yet," the scholar would reply.

With the passing of time, the scholar's hair turned gray, and he was still collecting material for his masterpiece. Finally he realized that he had grown old.

When next he was asked whether he had completed his book, he no longer returned his customary answer.

"Too late," he now said.

Thus it was that the years between "not yet" and "too late" summed up a man's life.

56. THE BONES OF A DEAD MONKEY

A money lender who employed rather sharp practices in amassing wealth attended church conscientiously every Sunday. In fact, he often declared that he was really searching for God.

One night he had a dream. He saw his deceased uncle, who seemed to be looking for something. From one end of the room to the other the apparition walked, opening drawers, examining closets, peering behind objects.

The money lender watched him curiously for some time.

"What are you looking for?" he finally asked his uncle.

"The bones of a dead monkey," the uncle replied.

"The bones of a dead monkey!" exclaimed the money lender. "Don't you know you'll never find them here?"

"How, then, do you expect to find God in your shady business?" his uncle replied before vanishing.

57. LOST LANGUAGE

Many persons have wondered why the human race speaks so many different languages. Research seems to indicate that in the beginning there was but one tongue. Speech at that time was not what it has become today. Thoughts did the work of machines, for inanimate objects responded to the words addressed to them. Great edifices like the pyramids were erected by speech. The blocks of stone, obedient to the human voice, did as they were bidden by those who knew how to command them. Composers were the architects of those days, and a symphony materialized outwardly as a symmetrical and harmonious temple. Of course, the structures externalized by poorer composers were used as banks and commercial houses.

But human beings have time and again demonstrated that they do not know how to appreciate gifts. They engaged in great battles of annihilation, using charged words as we use cannon balls as missiles. Our propaganda wars are but a faint reflection of these far more deadly conflicts.

After the Great Flood, this great power of speech was taken from man, and ever since he speaks but broken fragments of a far nobler language. How right and timely this action was can be understood when we consider the prevalence of cursing and swearing in our society.

The primal power of speech survives today only in the grand utterances of the poet and orator.

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